

# Finding your Feet:

## The strengths and Pitfalls of Leading from the front, Side, and Behind

The value of adaptation as a key leadership skill is becoming more and more apparent as the complexity and diversity of and within business increases. The greatest leaders can often adapt, at will. This begs the question- if you adapt so much then, well, who are you anyway? But it's only because those with a strong ability to adapt are so tuned into, aware, and conscious of their core that they are able to deviate, consciously and at will, from this when the situation or context demands for them to be or do differently.

Add to that, their ability to adapt is not necessarily innate; it comes with learning, practice, and a continued willingness to take a good look at the self for the sake of their development. While adaptation can take many forms, one of them that tends to show up a lot within leadership speak and practice is the position that leaders take; leading from the front, side, and behind. What does it really mean to take a different position, in any given moment, context, or role? As with most things, there are ideals and worst case scenarios to all three. The key is to first recognise what kind of leadership the team, situation, project, session, conversation, or the like requires and then adapt and deliver the ideal.

### Leading from the Front: Role-Modelling vs. Dependency

Leading from the front often conjures one of two images: a self-interested, 'fiery red' type leader who takes charge and is driven by action and momentum, or the inspirational people-person; charming, charismatic, humble and who is the voice of the people. At best, leaders who lead from the front are *role-models*. They gain followership by evoking admiration, curiosity, and inspiration, and a desire to 'be like them'. At worst, those who lead from the front create *dependency*. They over-do with 'telling', have the answers to everything, and use their expertise as their main pillar. Through this, and again at worst, their followership is gained through a case of learned helplessness- Bob knows best so I'll wait for him to tell me what to do, what decision to make, and which direction to take. They might also, indirectly, instil fear in doing the wrong thing, leaving their followership paralysed and waiting for Bob to make the first move.



### Leading from the Side: Collaborative vs. Controlling

Leading from the side is a tricky one because it's the subtlety here that makes it either hugely productive or hugely crippling. Leading from the side is probably best depicted as co-leading, whether it's co-leading a one-day workshop, co-leading a project, or co-leading a team or company through change. What people see is an equal level-footing and a partnership. At best, leading from the side offers a *collaborative* approach to productivity and performance through using open questioning, offering perspectives and different points of views, and real-time feedback. At worst, however, leading from the side can serve as a technique for *controlling* leaders who feel that they need a grip, eye, or ear on all things, all the time. 'I'm right here if you need me', 'how is the project going?', 'can I help with anything?' are all innocent until the motive or intention is less about being a dependable and near support system and more about not wanting to lose sight of what's going on.

### Leading from Behind: Empower vs. Apathy

Leading from behind, lastly, is arguably the way in which you can create the biggest impact with the least amount of time and effort; not bad for a workforce that's already bursting at the seams. Of course the trick is to get it right. At best, leading from behind is to *empower*. David Marquet<sup>1</sup>, an ex naval submarine Captain, tells a powerful story about what it took to cultivate greatness amongst his team. Marquet explains how he had to get out of the way of his crew to do their jobs as best as they could by having enough self-control and humility to be able to delegate authority to where the expertise was and creating the opportunity for the crew members to step up. The end result was an engaged, high performing team where each crew member was utilising their strengths and expertise in a well-coordinated way. On the flip side and at worst, however, leading from behind can look like a disappearing act where leaders lack visibility perhaps because they either undervalue or feel *apathetic* towards an issue, decision, or project.

It's important not to over-generalise when phrases like leading from the front and leading from behind are thrown around. Firstly it's key to remember that it can be just as impactful to lead from the side. Second, all three ways of leading can be enablers or blockers to growth, performance, and success depending on the motive and intention. When considering your actual or desired leadership impact, it's worth taking a moment to look carefully at the context in which you are meant to lead, to decide what position to take based on the impact you want to have, and to ensure that you exemplify the ideal. Front, side, or behind... At best, they're all great ways of leading and for different reasons. To Role-Model, Collaborate, or Empower, first recognise what the context needs and then adapt and deliver the ideal.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqmdLcyES\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqmdLcyES_Q)